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Taking on a Critical Approach to Global Justice Issues Teaching: Perspectives from Swedish Teachers

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ABSTRACT
This article aims to identify and shed light on areas of possibility and barriers for teachers who want to take on a critical approach to global justice issues (GJI). Fifteen upper secondary school teachers from four schools in Sweden participated in focus groups and discussions during a workshop on decolonial and critical approaches to teaching GJI to explore possibilities and challenges. Participants understand critical approaches as those that challenge mainstream perspectives and see this as both difficult and necessary. They express that there are plenty of opportunities and support to take such an approach in the existing curriculum but also note school-level challenges such as a crowded curriculum and assessment-focused culture. Participants find it difficult to engage the current generation of students in recognising and interrogating mainstream approaches and also in linking local and global responsibilities and concerns whereby GJIs can feel either "too close" or "too far away." Yet, these teachers are highly motivated to take up the challenge and innovate their teaching accordingly. The research contributes to understanding the possibilities and potential foreclosures regarding how teachers approach GJIs in their classrooms. Overall, our research highlights the need to support, develop and sustain reflexive approaches.

Keywords: *global justice issues; teaching; decolonial; pedagogy; teachers*

Introduction

A climate-changed world has direct and worrying implications for gender, racial and global justice as the least responsible for causing climate change are the most affected by its effects and consequences. Intricate questions about who should deal with "common but differentiated responsibilities" (UNFCCC, 2015) for the future of the world raise ethical and political global implications for today's classrooms. Scholars in the now well-established field of literature have pointed out the ways that global learning can reproduce colonial systems of power and called for more critical and reflexive approaches that take up rather than stepping over this tension (e.g., Andreotti, 2011,

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2021a; Bryan, 2022; Pashby et al., 2020). Schools have a crucial role to play in preparing students to engage responsibly with global justice issues. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal target 4.7 requires quality education for sustainable development and global citizenship, and the national curriculum in Sweden calls for the teaching of global justice issues (GJI) using a critical approach that explicitly takes up ethical issues and supports action for structural change. Despite a general policy consensus on the importance of supporting students to deeply consider ethical and political concerns around responsibilities, there is a lack of sustained research about how teachers can engage with ethical issues of systemic inequalities in day-to-day practice in classrooms. This paper explores how a group of upper secondary school teachers describes the possibilities and challenges of taking a critical approach to GJI in their school contexts.

When teachers in Sweden take on a critical approach to GJI, they do so within institutional contexts that shape possibilities and barriers for their teaching. Here, we use the term "institutional context" in a broad sense as the surroundings that set the conditions (possibilities and barriers) for teaching, which could include aspects such as curricula, syllabuses and policy, as well as the character of the student group or the collegial culture at the school. The Swedish educational system is governed by a national curriculum. The teaching of subjects in Swedish upper secondary schools also follows national plans for the subject and course syllabuses where the subjects' content and criteria for grades are stipulated. The students' grades in upper secondary school are the single most important factor for their possibility to enter university programmes and courses, even if other ways of admission also exist. In addition, it is the teacher who constructs forms for assessment (projects, tasks, exams, etc.), interprets the students' knowledge and decides their grades.[1] While there is a global educational policy trend that tends to instrumentalise education towards measurable outcomes and comparability (Grek, 2022; Lingard, 2022), the Swedish educational system still relies on teachers to interpret the nationally defined goals and content and concretise them into lessons (Skolverket, 2022). In that sense, there is a certain amount of room for teachers' professional judgement on how to address GJI in their classrooms. Yet, little research has explored in what ways they perceive that their institutional contexts, which set the conditions for teaching, offer possibilities and barriers to taking a critical approach to GJI.

The paper builds on an analysis of focus groups and extended wider discussions with 15 Swedish upper secondary school teachers who are participants in a project that explores decolonial perspectives in the teaching of GJI. First, we consider how existing research on Global Citizenship Education (GCE) and Environmental and Sustainability Education (ESE) establishes the need for critically reflexive approaches.

[1] In the subjects Mathematics, Swedish and English, teachers also ground their decisions on the students' performance on national exams which are carried out by the Swedish National Agency for Education.

We then describe our methods and how we collected and analysed the empirical data. Next, we present some key findings suggesting aspects of possibilities and areas of constraint that are explicated with examples from the teacher interviews. Finally, we raise the key implications of the findings.

Previous research and theory

Decolonial theory, largely driven by Latin American theorists such as Quijano, Dussel and Mignolo, offers an important conceptual contribution by identifying coloniality as the on-going global state of affairs in which "global power structures have remained asymmetrical, knowledge has remained Eurocentric and humanity has remained racially characterised" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, p. 60; see also Mignolo, 2011; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). A critical approach to teaching GJI informed by decolonial perspectives provides theoretical and conceptual resources to make visible how educational initiatives can unintentionally reproduce the unequal power relations at the heart of global justice issues (Andreotti, 2006). Applied pedagogically, researchers suggest decolonial frameworks can support teachers to engage critical perspectives in teaching GJI (Andreotti, 2021a, 2021b; Machado de Oliveira, 2021; Pashby et al, 2019).

Researchers seeking to centre coloniality in global learning have raised concerns that mainstream initiatives, despite good intentions, can often foreclose the complex historical and political nature of global issues and avoid a systemic analysis. Critical GCE emerged as an area of research that recognises the ways global inequalities can be reproduced in materials and activities in 'global North' contexts where students learn about issues seen as located in the 'global South' and respond through critically reflexive pedagogies. In a meta-review of different typologies of GCE identified in nine journal articles, Pashby et al. (2020) looked at three main discursive orientations (and their interfaces), all framed by a wider modern-colonial imaginary: neoliberal, liberal and critical. Interesting to note is that the review found that neoliberal GCE is both the most identified and most criticised form of GCE. Neoliberal GCE emphasises education in terms of its function for the development of human capital and how it can maximise "the performance of its future citizens towards employability" (p. 150). Moreover, within neoliberal GCE, students are positioned as self-motivated, entrepreneurial and competitive. Pashby et al. (2020) identify liberal humanist approaches in a more collective view of individuals developing as global citizens than in neoliberal orientations, but note that these remain largely framed by existing relations of power. In contrast, critical GCE "put[s] into question the roots of current mainstream Eurocentric notions of GC and cosmopolitanism" (p. 153). Pashby et al. (2020) point to how several of the typologies position critical GCE in opposition to neoliberal versions of GCE, and scholars of typologies note GCE is largely argued for in theory and not found as much in practice. Nevertheless, growing scholarship promoting critical GCE calls for a reflexive pedagogy that recognises and

engages with coloniality rather than stepping over it (Andreotti, 2006). Andreotti (2021a, 2021b) has also drawn attention to the complicity of formal educational settings in perpetuating unsustainability and historical as well as structural violence, and Pashby et al. (2020) cite her work in identifying a new interface, post-critical, that takes up ontological as well as methodological and epistemological levels of analysis.

While there is broad consensus on the importance of including GJI in education and significant theoretical discussions supporting a critical approach that takes up colonial systems of power and engages with tensions between perspectives, there remains a general lack of empirical research to explore the possibilities and constraints (Goren & Yemini, 2017). Meanwhile, in an interface with the post-critical, critical GCE scholarship has developed towards calls for GCE 'Otherwise' where educational opportunities develop learners' relationships to others (particularly to those in very different circumstances locally and globally) and to our shared relationships with the planet that are 'Otherwise' from what we have inherited from within the modern/colonial imaginary and that "interrupt the usual stories, politics and desires rewarded within modernity" (Andreotti, 2021b, p. 506; see also Stein & Andreotti, 2021). These stories requiring interruption include a focus on 'solutionism', where youth in the 'global North' learn about an issue within a school class or unit of learning with the aim of coming up with a solution to it without reflexive engagement (Pashby & da Costa, 2021, p. 387). GCE Otherwise focuses first on "facing humanity's wrongs, our own complicities in harm, and the potential of social and ecological collapse in our life time.…[,] highlight[ing] the importance of learning to walk a tightrope between naïve hope and desperate hopelessness with honesty, humility, humour and hyper-self-reflexivity" (Andreotti, 2021b, p. 506).

The wider discussion around the importance of critically reflexive GCE has pertinence in the Nordic context. As Eriksen et al. (2024) argue, despite their contextual differences, the Nordic countries are inclined to amnesia and sanctioned ignorance regarding their colonial histories, legacies and structures. Sweden has also been shaped by a self-image that colonialism is something that relates to other nations' histories and past (Höglund & Burnett, 2019). This self-image has been coupled with ideas of Nordic exceptionalism that refer to how Nordic countries often see themselves as separate from European colonialism and processes of globalisation (Jore, 2024; Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2012), and as naturally global promotors for equality, democracy and rights (Ipsen & Fur, 2009; Norgaard, 2011). During the last decades, this image has been heavily criticised and challenged by scholars who highlight how the Nordic countries are embedded in epistemologies and power relations that sustain coloniality and current global injustices (Eriksen et al., 2024; Jore, 2024). For teachers in Sweden who want to take on a critical approach to GJI, it therefore becomes important to address questions of national self-image, Eurocentric epistemologies and normative development discourses that risk re-enforcing injustices and power relations between the 'global North' and the 'global South.'

Importantly, there is also a strong tradition in education for sustainable development in Sweden with Environmental and Sustainability Education (ESE) researchers raising similar concerns regarding the importance of seeing environmental issues as also political and embedded in colonial relations of power (e.g., Bylund et al., 2024; Sund, 2016). As Khoo and Jørgensen (2021) have pointed out, it is important to stress the transformative overlaps and collaborative potential between critical and post-critical GCE and ESE. ESE scholarship has raised an over-focus on individualism and competition. Wals (2020) describes how current mainstream education tends to communicate a reverse ethic that centres on personal growth and employability without really considering issues of equity and environmental destruction. He refers to this as a hidden curriculum of unsustainability. Research on sustainability in the Nordic curricula shows that materials and practices tend to reinforce a Eurocentric perspective that reproduces harmful representations of subjects in the 'global North' and 'global South' (e.g., Eriksen, 2018; Eriksen & Stein, 2022). Current research challenges the neutrality with which Nordic countries have constructed a self-understanding of innocence in relation to historical injustices, particularly colonialism (Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2012), and how this also impacts on how racism is often denied within educational settings (Eriksen & Jore, 2023; Eriksen & Stein, 2022).

Sund and Öhman (2023) argue that neglecting power dynamics in ESE may result in reducing it to a mere educational task centred on modifying behaviour and acquiring various skills and competencies. Approaches based on skills and competencies assume the factors deemed crucial for 'success' today can be accurately predicted and remain context-independent and stable over time (Sund & Öhman, 2023; Willbergh, 2015; Öhman & Sund, 2021). Like researchers supporting critical and post-critical GCE (Andreotti, 2021a, 2021b; Stein et al., 2022) and educational philosophers concerned with global or cosmopolitan education (Biesta, 2019; Todd, 2021), Sund and Öhman (2023) also highlight the existential stakes of current ways of relating to the climate crisis and the need to work through denials and face the enormity of the crisis and how we are each complicit in it.

Research with teachers in England, Finland and Sweden looking at how critical GCE that centred coloniality as a key concept could support their teaching of GJI, demonstrated that many teachers and students find such approaches meaningful and engaging. There are also difficulties related to the political climate of the school, classroom and local community that can constrain such an approach (Pashby et al., 2019). The project on which this article is based presented an opportunity to take a deeper look at these possibilities and challenges in the Swedish context.

Method

The DecoPrax project and its participants

Our project, *A decolonial approach to teaching global justice issues* (DecoPrax 2022–2026), funded by the Swedish Research Council, responded to the above literature

calling for more critical approaches that centre coloniality in the teaching of GJI. It connects teachers' practice to emerging scholarship informed by decolonial theory in intersections of critical global citizenship, and environmental and sustainability education. Further, it seeks to explore how teachers who already identify as taking up or showing an interest in developing a critical approach can be supported and resourced towards GCE 'Otherwise'. Our project aims to explore, design and apply an educational framework informed by decolonial perspectives and rooted in the lived realities of classrooms. Working with a group of upper secondary teachers over three years who are interested in developing their practice in this regard, the project has three interlocking stages: i) initial focus groups at the schools; ii) a series of five workshops working with and discussing decolonial concepts, and working on co-producing teaching resources; and iii) school visits to observe and reflect on applications in practice. In this paper, we focus entirely on findings from the initial focus groups and follow-up discussions at the first workshop.

Fifteen teachers from four public schools (3–5 from each school) in the central region of Sweden volunteered to participate. The four schools are centrally located in four different cities or towns in the central region of Sweden. They responded to an invitation from the principal investigator (PI) through the mailing list of a national organisation that offers in-service training which is designed to support education in global issues for sustainable development in schools. The email described the project as an effort to empirically investigate with teachers the possibilities and challenges of incorporating a decolonial praxis in the teaching of global justice issues. The criteria for participating in the project included currently teaching courses or subjects that address global issues and an interest in exploring and trying out a critical approach to GJI and exploring decolonial approaches through the project stages. Thus, these teachers were already involved or interested in issues such as global justice and sustainable development before joining the project. The participants teach different subject areas such as Swedish, Social Sciences, Biology, Chemistry, Psychology, Religion, History, Geography, and cross-disciplinary courses in international relations and sustainable development. Our general understanding is that this is a group of highly skilled teachers who have extensive knowledge in their subject areas. All participants were given pseudonyms and the four schools were assigned the following pseudonyms: North, South, East and West.

Analysis

We conducted initial focus groups with 3–5 teachers (approximately 1.5 hours) at each of the four schools ahead of the first workshop, with the aim of identifying their initial perspective on their motivation to take a critical approach, as well as the challenges they faced. The focus groups provided insights about the participants' experiences and perceptions of the factors that shaped their current critical approaches or interest in developing critical approaches to GJI.

Focus groups allow informants to explore the subject in dialogue from many angles, capturing key aspects of the complex contexts in which they teach. The conversations generated understandings that are useful to both participants and researchers (Cameron, 2005). We also analysed approximately two hours of audio recordings from group discussions during the first workshop, where researchers asked participants to discuss the same topics across school groups in groups of four. Focus groups and workshop discussions were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed. We used the reflexive thematic analysis approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2019, 2022). Thematic analysis is a method of "identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The codes are then put into context with each other to create themes. As explained by Braun and Clarke (2019), themes do not 'emerge' from or wait to be found 'in' the data: "Themes are creative and interpretive stories about the data, produced at the intersection of the researcher's theoretical assumptions, their analytic resources and skill, and the data themselves" (p. 594). The analysis of the focus group data began with coding for all instances of key possibilities and tensions or challenges for taking a critical approach to GJI which characterise the institutional context. Themes were generated by organising codes around a broader concept that explains the unifying idea and deeper meaning behind the related codes. For example, by bringing together the various instances when the teachers talked about what role students have when taking on a critical approach in teaching, we developed the theme "Complexities of teaching the current generation" (see 4.3 below). This theme includes both possibilities and barriers that teachers identified, as well as their reflection on the complexities that come with teaching the current generation. Having the extra set of discussions at the workshop enabled further depth as they discussed across school groups. As there were three researchers analysing and coding the data, we aimed for an approach that was collaborative and reflexive to develop a richer, more nuanced reading of the data.

Findings

Below we describe four key topics from the data: (i) teachers' understanding of a 'critical' approach; (ii) curricular conditions for critical approaches; (iii) complexities of teaching the current generation; and (iv) possibilities for reflexive pedagogy.

Teachers' understanding of a 'critical' approach

Teachers on this project identified as being interested in exploring decolonial perspectives, and in the focus groups, we had an opportunity to ask them about their existing practice and why they thought critical approaches were important.

In two of the schools (North and East), the teachers pointed to how the critical perspectives on GJI are embedded in GJI themselves. For instance, Nils at the North school described how criticism of economic growth used to be a radical environmental view, but now positions against continued economic growth are a rather common

view: "it is no longer considered radical, but many people say that it is just a consequence of looking at the distribution of resources" (Nils, focus group). In this sense, bringing in critical perspectives that question the basic assumptions of the current economic system is for Nils a natural part of the subject matter, rather than something radical that he brings in in addition to the subject matter.

In a similar way, Erika and Elsa at the East school decided not to use the term "climate issue" but instead used the term "climate crisis." Erika said, "It doesn't even feel controversial to say that. And then I think both you [Elsa] and I think that if we have a crisis, then we have to talk a lot about solutions" (Erika, focus group). As with Nils' example, the subject matter itself (current distribution of resources and climate crisis) requires what they perceive as radical wording because the situation is so dire.

One key aspect of teaching GJI from a critical perspective described by teachers across the schools included making students aware of the mainstream perspective in which they are embedded. One of the teachers stressed how it is important to make the mainstream perspective visible *as* mainstream.

> And then there's system critique, and sometimes a lot of students find it very difficult to understand system critique at all. Because they don't understand that we're in the mainstream. (Erika, focus group)

In order for the students to develop a critical understanding of global issues, these teachers believe they need to understand what the mainstream is when it comes to societal structures and solutions. For example, Erika explained that the students can discuss and develop some critical perspectives, but they are always within the mainstream of economic growth and market solutions to GJI. When a mainstream or dominant perspective is identified, students can begin to recognise those limitations and explore minoritised or alternative perspectives and/or recognise they might not have the full context of an issue. To summarise, teachers understand critical approaches as those which raise mainstream perspectives and our embeddedness in them for scrutiny. This includes challenging the status quo systems of economics and centring the word crisis in studies of climate change.

Curricular conditions for critical approaches

Building on their understanding of the importance of a critical approach, we asked teachers about the role of the curriculum and syllabuses. Interestingly, none of the teachers identified the curriculum or syllabus as a barrier. Even when we explicitly asked about it in the focus groups, the teachers said that they did not experience this policy level as a barrier or hindrance. Instead, the teachers had ideas about what to teach and how, and then found support in the curriculum and syllabuses for what they already had planned. As the teacher Sandra expressed it during the workshop:

> At the same time, I have never really perceived that any course syllabus has been limiting. Rather, it is the teacher's perspective that is the limiting factor. When you teach about health, which you do a lot at your school, you can do it from this perspective [refers to a critical/decolonial perspective], it [the course syllabus] is not something that limits you. (Sandra, workshop)

Reflecting on the important role of teachers in interpreting the curriculum in the Swedish context, the teachers identified colleagues as a barrier pointing to a concern about how the wider school culture can limit the students' engagement. One of the teachers described how he and a colleague encountered resistance toward critical approaches and interdisciplinary initiatives from their colleagues:

> It is like, the resistance from colleagues is the framework, the school tradition. They stick to their profession, their four walls, the content that the state and they themselves have put on the table, and which the students should engage with. (William, focus group)

Another example of this is the centralised testing of students' knowledge. In one of the school focus groups, the teachers described how they have a very structured form of testing, where the knowledge is very "boxed in." When asked about who had developed this structure, Simon said, "Teachers, throughout the years, I would say" (Simon, focus group). Even if these teachers tried to move away from this matrix method of assessments where the knowledge is "boxed in," the culture was carried on by the students.

Sofia, one of Simon's colleagues, described how the students have very strong opinions and expectations about how the teaching process is organised. The students expect lectures during the lessons and for the content to be presented in a structured and theoretical way. As she expressed it, taking the role of student: "If I haven't lectured about something during the lessons, it doesn't exist" (Sofia, focus group). Thus, while these teachers see the national curriculum calls for teaching of GJI as supporting the explicit taking-up of ethical issues and including a plurality of perspectives and promoting action for (structural) change, its implementation in regards to assessment culture presents a challenge to integrating critical approaches to GJI into an overcrowded subject curriculum.

Complexities of teaching the current generation

In talking through the possibilities for and barriers to taking a critical approach in teaching GJI, teachers referred to the complexities of teaching youth in today's contemporary political context. In the focus groups, teachers from three of the four schools perceived that students today tend to be law abiding and that they react negatively toward actions that violate laws, such as civil disobedience. For example, one of the teachers had invited a member of the environmental movement Extinction Rebellion to give a talk to the students. The activist talked about non-violent direct action and civil disobedience conducted by the Extinction Rebellion movement, and the students reacted negatively.

> It doesn't sit well with quite a lot of students, who can't imagine making an impact by breaking laws... [I] remind them of the suffragettes, the voting rights movement, I remind them of apartheid in South Africa and the USA and so on, but young people today are not there. […] [They] are very ... embedded in an economic political model that means that "I go and vote. But I don't say out loud what I think." (Walter, focus group)

This teacher experienced many students to be cautious of more radical forms of activism when it comes to political change in society. In a related but different way, Sandra, a teacher at South school, described how students sometimes "just want to be students," and they do not feel up to addressing global injustices as a topic in their classrooms.

However, teachers indicated that not all students reacted with disdain for or discomfort around political action. They described how some students got really engaged and involved in heated discussions when GJI were brought up. In one way it is, therefore, problematic to characterise students as turning away from GJI in terms of "today's generation of youth." In fact, the teachers acknowledge the challenge of huge differences *within* the young generation of today. Teachers identify both "the Greta generation" who support youth activism against climate change *and* young people who express doubt about the extent to which they as individuals could make a difference to the problems discussed. Teachers also express differences between boys and girls, and between (and likely within) White inner city urban youth, rural youth (driving their EPA tractors[2] and burning fossil fuel), and different ethnic and racial groups in the school who seldom mix. Erika from the East school described how this is a form of cognitive dissonance for some of the students and a concern for teachers:

> Sometimes it surprises us, they [students] [act as if they] know everything, but then none of their friends are from another country, and they don't talk to anyone with a hijab. They are with their own. […] and we teachers talk a lot about it. (Erika, focus group)

Moreover, sometimes it is the students who bring the critical perspective into the teaching. This was experienced by Erika's colleague Elsa, also from the East school, who had given the students a task to interview people from another part of their city that is perceived as quite segregated and has a high percentage of newcomers to Sweden. The aim was to let the students talk to people with whom they do not usually socialise. In another example of students bringing in the criticality, some students criticised the task and labelled it as problematic "social tourism" (Elsa, workshop).

Thus, students can, on an intellectual level, be conscious about global issues and how framing justice issues can be problematic and also be committed in many ways. However, when it comes to their own position and practice, teachers describe their students' commitment generally as highly individual and closed within their own group. Building on their view of the importance of challenging mainstream perspectives in a critical approach, the teachers at East school described that their students could easily identify that Sweden has a role to play when it comes to global injustice. Yet, they reported that the students did not see themselves as being part of this "Sweden" (nor as bearing responsibility for what their state has done, or failed to do, by way of limiting greenhouse-gas emissions or past crimes like colonialism, for example).

[2] In Sweden, EPA tractors are vehicles that go up to 30 km/h and look similar to ordinary cars but do not require a regular driving licence. It is legal to drive them in regular traffic for everyone above the age of 15, making them popular among rural teenagers.

> When you talk about… I often think that many of our students talk about Sweden taking responsibility, but when they say Sweden, it is in Sweden on a larger front, that is not like "we". [...] Sweden as a country, but not necessarily "we," they do not really include themselves in Sweden. (Eva, focus group)

In discussing this tension during the workshop with participants from other schools, a question emerged regarding what kind of collective identity could be productive when addressing GJI in education. Eva turned to the concept of community.

> I was thinking about the concept "community". […] feeling that you are part of something, not that you are outside, above or below but the meaning of community as being part of something, and shared responsibility. (Eva, workshop)

The teachers expressed their perception of a dynamic tension in treating GJI in Sweden between recognising some degree of Sweden's complicity in today's global problems and a denial of or distancing from personal responsibility. Eva responded to this tension with an appeal to community and belonging. Moreover, the potential of the concept "community" might be that it both encapsulates a plurality of people and perspectives, yet at the same time is directed towards collective transformative change. A critical approach that takes up decolonial ideas as intended in subsequent phases of the project would see such a sense of community as plural and not static; there are some important entry points into reflexive discussions through the acknowledgement of Sweden's complicity.

Possibilities for reflexive pedagogy

The teachers in our study have also helped to articulate the role of reflexive pedagogy in critical approaches to GJI. Teachers expressed a commitment to reflexive pedagogy through their ambition to address questions of responsibility. However, they expressed that bringing up questions of students' responsibility in relation to global injustices is difficult. They described how for some students the question of responsibility can lead to feelings of discouragement. Susanne, from the South School, expressed this difficulty:

> **Researcher:** What kind of image of their own responsibility do they get from your teaching? When it comes to global ... what perception of themselves and their responsibility? […] Or understanding of their own role and responsibility in these issues?
>
> **Susanne:** I think there are quite a lot of things that come to mind, for instance, those who think it is hard. So, they get some kind of dystopian feeling that "this can't be solved." (Susanne, focus group)

Her comment suggests that students feel there are so many factors beyond their control. Yet, the teacher also added that some of the students did become engaged, telling her, "I want to do more." A key concern was how the teachers can raise questions of responsibility without fuelling a sense of dystopia and apathy. The teachers described

it as a balancing act between distance and closeness. If the GJI were too far from the students' everyday experiences, then the issues may not create engagement, and if the issues came too close, it may become too emotionally heavy to handle. Susanne's colleague Sandra experienced this tension between distance and closeness when she did a United Nations role play with the students. Reflecting on lessons where teachers tried to directly provoke the links between the everyday use of mobile phones in Sweden and violence in the contexts where minerals are extracted to create these phones, Sandra reflected,

> I really haven't researched this, but I have a feeling that when teaching becomes … like a little too close, some students can't cope with it properly. Because … it actually means that you might have to reflect on your own position. (Sandra, focus group)

Neither the students nor the teacher unpacked this very provocative input, and so it is difficult to assess precisely why the students reacted that way. This teacher's description sheds light on the pedagogical challenges and the need for reflexive pedagogy to enable space for developing a reflexive response and time to unpack such complexities.

Another concrete and constructive example of how teachers told us they handled these kinds of issues was expressed by the teachers in the East School. The teachers conducted field trips to a country in the 'global South' with their students, and during these field trips the question of distance and closeness became accentuated. To address this, the teachers used a theoretical model consisting of four corners that can stretch towards or away from each other. The model, which is called "the kite model," illustrates the relation between *commitment* and *understanding*, and between *distance* and *closeness*. During the field trips, the teachers made use of this model to discuss the students' own positionality in relation to what they experienced. For instance, a teacher could make a student aware that s/he felt very committed to help the people s/he met but perhaps had little understanding of the context or the situation at large. Thus, the teachers handled the question of commitment/understanding and distance/closeness by making it explicit to the students and providing a framework to think through the tensions as something they could discuss together.

Another concrete example of reflexive pedagogy developed by the teachers was described by Einar who, together with his colleagues at the East School, deliberately tried to redirect the teaching away from starting in students' own opinions and values. He described the problem that when starting with the students' own opinions on a topic, the lesson tends to get stuck in the students' pre-existing values in a non-productive way. Instead, they began by putting a provocation on the table. It could be a text, a literary figure, or something similar, and then they discussed the values and perspectives that are present in the text or expressed by the character. In that way, the students "do not need to cling to their own invested identity, in having values" (Einar, focus group). This approach offers an opportunity to disrupt the established story of "having an opinion" by decentring and complexifying the individual student's relationship to the issue.

Discussion

According to the perspectives of participants in our study, teaching GJI presents unique challenges and opportunities. Our participants are teachers who are already committed and interested but have not yet necessarily explored decolonial praxis, and we reviewed findings from focus groups and workshop discussions before we began to explore decolonial concepts more directly with them in the later stages of the project. As shown above, these teachers find support in the curriculum as it calls them to take up ethical issues and provide students with plural perspectives and promote actions for (structural) change. Yet, they described that it was difficult to integrate a critical approach into an overcrowded syllabus. Across the sample, the teachers articulated a tough balance between engaging students responsibly with GJI and avoiding doom-and-gloom. They are dealing with students' emotional responses to (the threat of) climate change, and they are innovating around this actively. They observed that while many students are interested in GJI, they can disengage when increasingly urgent questions of appropriateness of responsibility become too close or too hard. These teachers described grappling with how to pedagogically engage with responsibility to take action while recognising the need for systemic change and being appropriate to students' actual sphere of influence.

When reflecting on our analysis of findings from a wider perspective, taking on a critical approach to GJI raises fundamental normative questions about teaching. Our participants' contributions to the focus groups suggest GJI touches upon the very heart of teacher professionality and what it means to teach in turbulent times and unequal societies. Even though these teachers teach different subjects, they expressed a common challenge: It is not an easy task to take a critical perspective on GJI in concrete classroom settings, even for teachers who are highly engaged and find support for it in the curriculum and syllabuses. This finding sheds light on the intricate relations between students, teachers and the subject matter that constitute teaching (cf. Hudson, 2002). Thus, what constituted barriers for these teachers according to them was not a lack of opportunity in the curriculum but rather the complexities of the teaching practice itself and in the relations that take place in classrooms. The institutional barriers are present to our participants, not through the curriculum and syllabuses, but through the culture of a grade-oriented approach to learning. In other words, the curriculum and syllabus shape these teachers' barriers indirectly through the students' socialisation into an established culture of structured goal-oriented lessons directly tied to exam expectations. While research shows the strength of neoliberal underpinnings of education more broadly and GCE more specifically and raises the importance of supporting critical approaches in practice (e.g., Pashby et al., 2020), our findings suggest these seemingly oppositional orientations are experienced in tandem and simultaneously in the institutional context of schools. Our participants' descriptions of their teaching contexts suggest that teachers in Sweden who want to critically address GJI will need to take up students' perspectives that may be embedded in Nordic exceptionalism

and Eurocentric perspectives, and self-images that reinforce colonial epistemologies (see Eriksen & Stein, 2022; Pashby et al., 2023; Pashby & Sund, 2020), and, at the same time, they are responsible for their role in the students' grade-oriented imperatives and exam expectations. In this sense, our findings reinforce Pashby et al.'s (2020) articulation of the interfaces evident in orientations to GCE, as there are spaces of ambivalence where, in this case, neoliberal and critical approaches overlap. Indeed, teaching about GJI inherently raises normative questions about what responsibility individuals and societies have and what ethical responses are available. Moreover, while some participants express a significant challenge of feeling pressured by students to somehow balance distance and closeness where the global justice problem is "too far away" and "too close," teachers also express this challenge as a motivation for a reflexive approach. They are interested in exploring together different approaches to engaging this tension, suggesting this is a keystone to understanding the possibilities and potential foreclosures regarding how teachers approach GJI in their classrooms.

Turning to the possibilities that these teachers identify, a similar reflection can be made. In the example where the teacher described how students criticised a task as "social tourism," the critical potential was already present without the teacher being the one bringing it in. As with the barriers, our findings suggest the possibilities are not only found in the external policy but in the concrete teaching practice and relations that take place in the classroom. From what these teachers expressed, critical perspectives will not necessarily be found without effort nor without the teacher's active and conscious teaching practice. Instead, if teachers want to take a critical approach to GJI, then it is perhaps not primarily about implementing something external, but there are possibilities for opening critical perspectives on GJI through actively searching for moments, situations and relations in their current teaching. This finding supports the project design for the subsequent interlocking stages by highlighting that this may not primarily be about *implementation*, but instead tools for *reflection* can support teachers in this process of searching and identifying openings for taking on a critical approach to GJI. In the second and third stages of our project, we will explore the potential to co-produce practice-oriented and reflexive resources building on the workshops where they engage with decolonial concepts to contribute to their existing critical GJI practice.

To conclude, despite some important institutional challenges, these teachers critically engage with GJI by centring ethical issues and explicitly challenging and raising awareness about what is taken for granted (the dominant norm, mainstream perspectives) and how to disrupt and reflect on mainstreamed and naturalised perspectives and practices. This adds a nuance to GJI learning and supports teachers to think and act in ways that work to dismantle the structures of privilege, opening up possibilities for deepening their pedagogy and supporting students to engage with the ethical nature of today's GJI.

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Karen Pashby is Professor of Global Citizenship Education, Lead for Research in the School of Education at Manchester Metropolitan University and President of the Comparative International Education Society of Canada (2023–2025). Her research explores how to engage productive pedagogical tensions in reflexive approaches to ethical global issues in 'global North' contexts.

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